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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 001704

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#) [AUC](#)

SUBJECT: APPREHENSION IN URABA FOR AUC DEMOBILIZATION

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, reasons
1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: On January 29, a USAID contracting team tasked to analyze the GOC's demobilization plans for the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), USAID personnel, and poloff visited Apartado, in the Uraba region of Antioquia Department. The GOC expects to implement an AUC demobilization in 2004 in Uraba, which has a heavy AUC presence. Dario Mejia from the High Commissioner for Peace Office arranged meetings with the local military commander, Chamber of Commerce, a Church representative, a plantain farming cooperative, and a private security firm to hear their views on a potential AUC demobilization. Many of the interlocutors expressed apprehension about the GOC's ability to provide security if the paramilitaries units in the region were to demobilize. Much of the Uraba region has been controlled by the AUC since about 2001. The area has been historically plagued by violence and instability until recently when murder, kidnapping, and other crimes decreased. End Summary.

2. (C) Uraba, which covers northern Antioquia Department and western Cordoba Department, is likely to be one of the first AUC demobilization areas in 2004. The GOC's ability to provide legitimate state security and social services there could prove crucial to the peace process's continued progress.

Potential Security For an AUC Demobilization

3. (C) General Paulino La Torre, head of the Army's 17th Brigade, which is responsible for Uraba and parts of Choco Department, acknowledged that there is public concern that the military and police will not be able to provide adequate security in the event of an AUC demobilization and that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) will seek to re-take the region. However, he is confident that his brigade is up to the task for the following reasons:

-- A greater public security presence since President Uribe took office: there are now police units of approximately 40 men each and hometown soldiers in all 13 municipalities, in addition to the permanent presence of three Army companies. La Torre noted that there are over 3,000 soldiers and police operating in Uraba. When asked why this many soldiers have had problems subduing only several hundred illegally armed combatants, La Torre replied that: (1) the brutal intimidation methods used by both groups enables them to control large parts of the region with a relatively small fighting force; and (2) the region traditionally has had a small state presence, especially in the heavily forested, mountainous uplands.

-- Violence in the region -- while still a major problem -- has decreased dramatically in the past year. La Torre claims this is in part because the paramilitaries who operate in the area have largely obeyed the cease-fire agreed upon in late 2002. Data from the Vice Presidency's Office corroborates this assertion: of the approximately 370 confirmed paramilitary human rights violations nationwide since November 2002, only three or four have been in the Uraba region.

4. (C) La Torre estimated that there are about 300 paramilitaries in Uraba in three groups: Carlos Castano's AUC, drug trafficker Diego Murillo's (alias "Don Berna") forces, and the Central Bolivar Bloc. These groups have dominated most of the region since about 2001 after several years of violent clashes with the FARC. There are an estimated 150 FARC guerrillas, who have been pushed by the AUC into pockets of territory in the region's upland areas.

Community Representatives Skeptical

5. (C) Several members of the Chamber of Commerce said they were concerned about the consequences of a paramilitary demobilization. Many acknowledged that they had personally been extorted, threatened, or had family members killed or kidnapped in years past by the FARC. They said that the AUC presence had stabilized the region during the past four or

five years, resulting in increased investment, especially in the banana growing areas. They feared retaliation by the FARC if the paramilitaries were to demobilize. They emphasized, however, that they are in favor of a paramilitary demobilization, but only if the GOC can guarantee a secure and viable state presence.

16. (C) Father Leonides Moreno from the Roman Catholic church of Apartado supports all peace efforts, including the AUC peace process. He acknowledged that an AUC demobilization would be complicated, especially in light of the region's widespread drug trafficking activity.

17. (C) Dario Mejia from the Peace Commissioner's Office conducted a confidential question and answer session with about 20 plantain farmers to determine their views of security in the region. Very few said that they had been directly hurt by the armed conflict. However, about one third claimed that they did not think the GOC was capable of providing adequate security at the present time, suggesting that they feel that some other group -- most likely the AUC -- is protecting them.

Former CONVIVIR Confident

18. (C) Two managers of a private security firm that was founded ten years ago as part of the then-legal, state-sponsored self defense groups (convivir) expressed their opposition to all illegal armed groups, including the AUC. The firm, which has about 100 employees, is willing to offer jobs to ex-paramilitaries, in an un-armed capacity. It currently employs several former guerrillas. The managers expressed confidence that the GOC would not leave the area vulnerable to attack from the FARC. They also suggested that private firms, such as their own, could play an important role in providing security after an AUC demobilization. (Comment: In many respects the private security firms would be performing much of the functions now performed by the AUC, but presumably within a framework of law and without drug trafficking. End Comment.)

19. (C) Comment: Uraba illustrates a complicated conjunction of issues: (1) Citizen fear of violence, especially by the FARC; desire to return to normalcy; and lack of confidence in the ability, not the goodwill, of government forces; (2) the benefits, already in place of President Uribe's policy to strengthen the public security presence throughout the country; and (3) the complexity of the paramilitary problems, especially regarding the peace process.

WOOD